Humanitarian practices have emerged as one of the most contested sites of misunderstanding between postcolonial elites and the West. Humanitarian interventions are motivated by the imperative of providing aid and alleviating suffering, claim the benevolent agents of the global humanitarian order. Postcolonial writers suspect that Humanitarianism and manufactured dependency are closely linked. Both sides, however, seem to agree that humanitarianism has emerged as one of the fastest growing articulations of “globalization.” The humanitarian phenomenon in Africa is both much praised and much criticized. In fact, it may be said that humanitarian aid, which is delivered through the transnational network of mostly Western non governmental organizations. The exponential expansion of humanitarianism since the collapse of the Berlin wall reflects an increasing “moralization of development assistance in general” (de Waal, 304) while development aid to poor countries has always been framed in humanitarian terms. Albert Schweitzer, the Nobel Peace Prize laureate of 1952, is one of the emblematic figures of the first “humanitarian mission” that was strictly articulated in the triumphant days of the colonial era. The Nobel Peace Prize laureate in 1999, the Franco-Belgian transnational group Doctors Without Borders, a worthy descendant of Schweitzer,
Cilas Kemedjio

has, for its part, concentrated its interventions in the so-called failed States. Schweitzer and the self-representation of Doctors Without Borders as humanitarians is articulated around an amnesia on their collaboration with colonial or post-imperial power-brokers. François-Xavier Verschave and Pierre Péan have concluded that the humanitarian strategy that led to the birth of Doctors Without Borders was initially aligned with the positions defended by the French government during the Nigerian civil war. Starvation was used as a propaganda device to undermine the Nigerian central government and to legitimize military aid to the secessionists. The Humanitarian rhetoric was invoked as a shield to cover military shipments to the rebels; the Humanitarian rhetoric was thus used as a shield to advance French national interests in the subversion of the Nigerian State.

Faced with the incestuous relationship between these two iconic French humanitarians and their government’s volonté de pouvoir, we may ask to what degree has the colonial enterprise of “civilizing mission” simply been retooled under an updated rhetoric of post-World War II, and now post-Cold War humanitarianism. After all, Humanitarianism thrives in a world where “new global empires rise to enforce their own civilizing missions in the name of democracy and free markets” (Bhabha x). We need to remember that colonialism presented itself as a humanitarian enterprise, and also produced some of the most famous humanitarians, including the aforementioned Dr. Albert Schweitzer. Calhoun reminds us that the First-World consciousness, initially shaped by colonial projects, remains “an uncomfortable feature of humanitarian action.” (Calhoun, 41).

Gayatri Spivak asked a question in her famous article, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” We reiterate this question with reference to humanitarian aid: can the voice of assisted populations be heard? Is there room in refugee camps for critically engaging the very action that may be the difference between life and death? Humanitarian agents who intervene in Africa have fortunately begun to reflect critically on their performances and the broader structures of which they are a part: on what David Kennedy has called “the dark side of humanitarianism.” Calhoun observes that “humanitarian workers are a highly self-critical group, struggling with the contradictions
of their work.” (Calhoun, 55) Kennedy notes that the “darker sides can swamp the benefits of humanitarian work, and well-intentioned people find themselves entrenching the very things they have sought to denounce.” (Kennedy, xiii). However, such an undertaking is rather uneasy because humanitarianism is allergic to critical analysis, as any attempt to even consider raising questions may unleash what Barnett and Weiss call an “ontological insecurity” in the humanitarian realm. The task is even made harder when interventions are framed as a moral duty originating in religious obligations: “The negatives are discussed privately, often cynically, but rarely strategically. With so much evil out there to fight, it hardly seems worth it to focus on the downsides of the few humanitarian practices which have been set in motion.” (Kennedy, xiii-xiv). The critical investigations initiated by humanitarian agents are therefore contained within their circles, protected as family secrets. These critical investigations on humanitarian interventions are closed because they are intended for local consumption, that is, restricted to western audiences. The recipients of humanitarian aid, “an actor that is largely absent and silent in many operations and policy-oriented conversations” (Barnett/Weiss, 46-47), remains excluded. Therefore, even the critical investigations fail to challenge the perpetuation of academic discourses that emerge from this field of studies.

Yet, the blind spots of humanitarian interventions in Africa ought to be critically investigated. While Western agents are largely afforded the means to represent themselves, the assisted populations are silent, rendered voiceless. I suggest that the field of critical investigations on humanitarian interventions ought to be broadened to make room for postcolonial voices. I have no illusions that starving bodies will be heard, or that entire communities caught in refugee camps amidst wars or natural disasters would inform our analysis. However, it is critical that postcolonial voices be made part of this discussion. These critical investigations are not designed for members only. These postcolonial critiques are directed at assisted populations, postcolonial governing authorities and donor countries or institutions as well as humanitarian workers. Humanitarian interventions, seen from this perspective, are part and parcel of this relationship, resulting in shadowy zones where
political calculations and altruistic concerns meet. What we refer to as the Fanonian imperative, then, is the task set by postcolonial intellectuals to unmask the imperial and market forces that drive humanitarian action on the African continent. The pragmatic and ethical tensions among donors, sycophantic governments, international financial institutions, and local and foreign citizens therefore need to be critically explored.

African voices have been significantly absent in the debate about the emergence of the humanitarian order as a significant dimension of global relations. The humanitarian narrative has therefore been mostly a monologue dominated by western agents engaged in humanitarian interventions. African writers and filmmakers have registered their presence in the humanitarian discourse. Bassek Ba Khobio’s critical biography of Albert Schweitzer in *Le Grand Blanc de Lambaréné* is echoed by Sembène Ousmane who focused on issues of dignity in *Guelwaar, Emitai, and Camp de Thiaroye*. The theme recurs again in Ahamdou Seck’s *Saraaba* or Mandé-Alpha Diarra’s *Sahel! Sanglante sécheresse*. Sembène has forcefully articulated how colonial actions such as the draft during the two world wars and the requisition of food have worked to make food security more precarious.

Critical investigations that target the unintended consequences of humanitarianism as a practice theoretically agree with the good intentions professed by humanitarian agents. The critique is therefore localized in the fault lines of an otherwise noble enterprise. The critic that sets as her/his objective to challenge the politics of humanitarianism repudiates the entire enterprise because of its incestuous connections with the “forces of destruction” that have worked over the centuries to undermine the survival of the people of the “hidden face of the earth”. The radical repudiation of humanitarianism proceeds from a genealogical unearthing of the layers of oppression that serve to undermine the good intentions that undergird humanitarian interventions. Emmanuel Dongala and Ngugi wa Thiong’o embody these two dimensions of the inscription of humanitarianism in the African Imagination.

In his novel, *Johnny Mad Dog*, Congolese writer Emmanuel Dongala articulates the contradictions of emergency humanitarian aid from the perspective of the dignity of assisted populations.
Dongala questions the sensationalism that is the hallmark of media coverage of humanitarian interventions. He challenges what has been dubbed the “pornography of aid”, raising ethical questions about the marketing of human suffering that has come to represent a major aspect of humanitarian ventures. Humanitarian redemption, Dongala suggests, may well come at the expense of the human dignity of displaced populations. *Johnny Mad Dog*, writes one critic, is “actually one of a cluster of recent novels about child soldiers in Africa” (Valdes, 27). She claims further that the plight of children enrolled in civil wars “appears to affect African writers as deeply as 9/11 has affected American ones.” (Valdes, 27). Although one may not agree with this argument, it does certainly mean that the genre is in vogue, at least with American publishers of African writers. Maureen Moynagh, speculating on the focus of the figure of “the African child soldier as a subject of violence in need of human rights intervention and rehabilitation,” thinks that the Western imagination, conditioned by colonial stereotypes, is ready for such depictions. The novel was made into a film of the same name, shot in location in Sierra Leone. Both the novel and the film received considerable attention in the mainstream popular media “for they believe that a news story from Africa without pictures of people dying from poverty, famine, or ethnic warfare could not possibly be interesting to their audience at home.” (Ngugi 2000, 74). Despite Dongala’s critical rendition of humanitarian agents, humanitarianism emerges in the novel as a force of redemption, therefore giving credence to what Mutua describes as the narrative of the “savage, victim, savior” (quoted in Coundouriotis, 193). The posture of the radical postcolonial critic, as we shall see with Ngugi, opposes the providential humanitarian impulse with a sustained recollection of its genealogy. I will start with the analysis of humanitarianism as a manifestation of postcolonial dystopia before exploring its anecdotal critique in Dongala’s novel.

**Humanitarianism as postcolonial dystopia**

The project of “postcolonial literary nationalism” is explained by the fact that African intellectuals, “whether as volunteers, draftees, or resisters in a struggle for the articulation of their respective
nations” (Appiah 1993, 53), made the legitimation of nations one of the imperatives of their writing. Still, narratives that seek to legitimize the nation do not survive the “mésaventures de la conscience nationale” (misadventures of national consciousness,) leading critics to observe the failure of the nationalist utopia beginning with the end of the first decade of the independence. Writers who were dreaming about the nation during anticolonial struggles therefore turned into doubters. The dearly won independence was soon ensnared in neocolonialism, cold-war politics, and globalization. They belonged to a class with no capital, no inventors among its members, no new worlds to conquer and rob—only a world in which to beg and a nation to rob” (Ngugi 2009: 81; my emphasis). The neocolonial State is repudiated and a new narrative, that of the delegitimation of the state, takes root. African writers, “anxious to escape neo-colonialism, are no longer committed to the nation” (Appiah 1993, 152). The humanitarian articulation of this global narrative derives from the fact that it reflects a failure of both the nationalist utopia and the dream of an Internationale of Resistance that was for a long time embodied by the Left. As I have argued elsewhere, the movement of decolonization was itself inscribed in the network of the International left (Kemedjio 2012). Humanitarian interventions, for these disillusioned writers of the nationalist legitimation, are only the latest variation of the old partition of imperial domination. Malawian historian Elias Mandala gives voice to this line of thinking when he claims that NGOs are the “West’s consulates in this era of informal empire”.

Ngugi wa Thiong’o (The Wizard of Crow, Something Torn and New: An African Renaissance), Mongo Beti (L’Histoire du fou), Werewere Liking (La Mémoire amputée) locate the irruption of humanitarianism within the narrative of the collapse of the postcolonial State. For these cultural producers, the humanitarian response must therefore be considered within the broader narrative of Africa’s relationship with the West. The generational identity of these writers, veterans from the anticolonial and neocolonial trenches, has led me to read their humanitarian moment as symptomatic of narratives of postcolonial dystopia. This postcolonial dystopia echoes the days, when, in Remember Ruben or Petals of Blood, Mongo Beti and Ngugi were trumpeting the national utopia
that they believed was going to emerge from the ashes of a “dying colonialism.” The collapse of autocratic African regimes, the unintended consequences of globalization and the proliferation of civil wars have transformed Africa into a theater par excellence of humanitarian interventions. Coundouriotis, in her analysis of recent child soldier narratives, shows how, from Soyinka to Iweala and Abani, the expression “beasts of no nation” has come to embody the shift from ultimate defeat of the “postcolonial politics of resistance.” (Coundouriotis 195-196). Humanitarianism rises on the ashes of the postcolonial state, henceforth fragmented into non-governed enclaves. According to Fassim, “the humanitarian seeks to present himself or herself as the one who intervene “precisely in place where sovereignty is either abusively exerted or temporarily suspended.” (Fassim 276). Schweitzer was against any idea of independence; Doctors Without Borders operates on territories that are devoid of any meaningful state control. The Postcolonial State that isn’t provides the ground for Doctors Without Borders’ brand of humanitarianism. From Schweitzer to Doctors Without Borders, I argue that the Humanitarian Misunderstanding has been globalized at the expense of weakened and fragmented postcolonial states.

Ngugi reminds us in *Globalectics* that the postcolonial has always been concerned with the global. Ngugi’s assertion takes us back to Appiah’s less charitable comment about the postcolonial intellectual as a borderline character, a compradore whose mission is to mediate the transactions between the West and the natives (Appiah, 1993). Ngugi has consistently articulated Africans’ misgivings with regard to humanitarian enterprises. Charity, Ngugi suggests, is more often than not coterminous with capitalism. This insight challenges the very idea of western aid to Africa. According to Ngugi, the looting of Africa, from the slave trade to current globalization by way of colonialism, is the main culprit in the manufacturing of humanitarian disasters.

The defeat of the Pan-Africanist utopia is translated by famished bodies that become the hallmark of failed States: “as a result of famines, massacres, denials of rights, insecurity, and intolerance—replicas of colonial times—virtually every African State is hosting refugees from its neighbors and citizens continue to flee from the
continent altogether—a brain drain that is much talked about.” (Ngugi 2009, 89). States depending on humanitarian manna for their survival reproduce the pathetic destiny of populations that, by being forced to beg, end up as touristic attractions: “Pictures of beggars or wild animals were what many tourists sent back home as proof of having been in Africa. In (fictional) Aburiria, wild animals were becoming rare because of dwindling forests and poaching, and tourist pictures of beggars and children with kwashiorkor and flies massing around their runny noses and sore eyes were prized for their authenticity.” (Ngugi 2004, 35). The proliferation of refugee camps swarming across the continent creates non-governed enclaves that call for humanitarian intervention.

It becomes therefore important to question the role of humanitarianism in the memory of exploitative and unequal power schemes that are, at least in part, responsible for scuttling the project of postcolonial State construction. In other words, is the Western humanitarian a challenge or a continuation of the very processes that plunged the African continent into darkness? Ngugi suspects aid, in its humanitarian incarnation, to be the tree that hides the forest of ravages brought on by the adventures of capitalism. According to Ngugi, the transnational financial networks, represented by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, are in the process of privatizing entire countries, especially postcolonial states. Such a process, that is conducted under the guise of democratization and good governance, has all the trappings of a remake of the colonial take-over: “Corporate capital was aided by missionary societies. What private capital did then it can again: own and reshape the Third World in the image of the west without the slightest blemish, or blot. NGOs will do what the missionary charities did in the past” (Ngugi 2006, 746; my emphasis). Barnett and Weiss share this assessment when they suggest that in the post-cold war era, aid agencies are effectively becoming “welfare workers as the neoliberal state outsources its basic welfare functions while focusing on the needs of the private sector.” (Barnett/Weiss 17). Ngugi approaches the criticism of humanitarian aid through its role in the deployment of the logistics of the subjugation of African peoples. Indeed, as noted earlier, the missionaries of aid, from the
beginnings of colonization, have had as their mission to place
compresses on the wounds of a disaster brought about in part by
the logic of capitalist exploitation.

The ethics of humanitarianism
Didier Fassin situates the origins of the modern humanitarian
movement at the moment in history when “moral sentiments became
the driving force for a politics, which was not simply a politics of
pity, as Hannah Arendt argues, but also one of solidarity” (Fassin
272). Kwame Anthony Appiah, in Cosmopolitanism, suggests that
the implementation of human solidarity requires us to go beyond
particular and localized loyalties en route for a truly cosmopolitan
ethics: “Each person you know and can affect is someone to whom
you have responsibilities: to say this is just to affirm the very idea of
morality. The challenge, then, is to take minds and hearts formed
over the long millenia of living in local troops and equip them with
ideas of institutions that will allow us to live together as the global
tribe we have become” (Appiah, xiii). The difficulty of designating
the very phenomenon of the “global tribe” speaks to the uneasiness
about what is generally referred to as globalization. Appiah rejects
this term because of its narrow economic connotations.
Multiculturalism, in the same perspective, is less than satisfactory
because it sometimes signifies or is at the root of the problems it
seeks to redress. Appiah finally settles upon cosmopolitanism even
though he recognizes that this terms may suggest “an unpleasant
posture of superiority toward the putative provincial.” (Appiah, xiii).
Humanitarianism has emerged as one of the modalities of
implementing this ethical demand. Appiah, in adopting
“cosmopolitanism”, signals his misgivings about the term
globalization because of its economic resonance. The humanitarian
modality of universal solidarity emerges from the recognition of
the limits of the normative economic model guided by “the cutthroat
ethos of laissez-faire capitalism” (Klein 113). Calhoun suggests that
Cosmopolitanism, precisely thanks to its humanitarian vocation, is
an “ethically attractive part of the globalization package” (Calhoun,
86).
Some scholars have argued that the movement to abolish the slave trade can be seen as the prefiguration of modern humanitarianism (Rubio, 729; Pétré-Grenouilleau, 215-220). The movement marks the passage from charity to a more cosmopolitan form of action. Yet abolitionists do not necessarily challenge the hierarchical dimensions of philanthropy. French historian Olivier Pétré-Grenouilleau, in a controversial book on the slave trade, suggests that abolitionism does not only foreshadow the current humanitarian ideology. He goes on to suggest that as a principle of universal human rights, abolitionism was conceptualized and implemented in Europe before being exported to Africa and other parts of the world under western domination. Abolitionism, despite its grounding in an ethics of universal solidarity, does appear to function as one of the markings of Western superiority. We all remember the image of a black man kneeling at the feet of a white man and asking, “Am I not a brother?”. This image is the most powerful inscription of the unequal distribution of power that is reproduced in the workings of non governmental organizations intervening in less fortunate parts of the world, especially in Africa (Appiah, 201; Archer-Straw, 2005).

NGOs from the global North are the most visible agents of the global humanitarian order. These NGOs are “top-down efforts in which money and expertise empowered some to act for-or in-others.” (Calhoun, 2010, 44). NGOs are organizations where charitable intentions meet the philanthropic arm of capitalist donors to make humanitarian practices possible. NGOs and capitalism proceed from two radically divergent motivations, and that’s why we need to suspect their alliance. Margaret Atwood reminds us in her book Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth, that “Scrooge’s happy ending is [...] entirely in keeping with the cherished core belief of capitalism. His life pattern is worthy of Andrew Carnegie—make a bundle by squeezing and grinding, and then go into philanthropy.” (Atwood, 99). The debate over humanitarianism is also and foremost a debate over the meaning of the very act of redeeming. Redemption, which is also at the center of the Christian faith, cannot be separated from debt, as Atwood teaches us in her book cited above: “Christ is called a Redeemer, a term drawn directly from the language of debt and pawning or pledging, and thus also from that of substitute
sacrifice.” (Atwood, 67). We are reminded that colonial missionaries were bent on converting colonized peoples on the basis of Christian superiority. Éric Deroo, discussing the survival of imperial and colonial myths, evokes the case of missionaries of non-governmental organizations that who are convinced that their mission is to teach African mothers how to breastfeed. For Deroo, in order to fully comprehend the good faith and the civilizing spirit that undergirded colonizers in the 1930s, it is imperative to look at humanitarian agents of our times who are inhabited by the same “innocent arrogance,” believing that they have something to offer to others (Deroo, 20). The redeemed slaves, having received the gift of freedom, owe a spiritual or moral debt to their redeemers. Redeemed Africans ought to be grateful to their Redeemers, from abolitionists to agents of the humanitarian global order, unless they claim some unpaid debt from their self-proclaimed benefactors.

Barnett and Weiss suggest that “discourses surrounding rights, sovereignty, and justice have slowly but impressively created new standards for states, provided new metrics of civilization, and suggested a new rhetoric of justification for intervention on behalf of the weak and powerless” (Barnett/Weiss 20-21). The question we must therefore confront will be whether or not the full humanity of the “weak and powerless” is taken into account in the course of humanitarian intervention. Any attempt to even consider asking such questions may unleash what Barnett and Weiss call an “ontological insecurity” in the humanitarian realm. To ask questions is sometimes equated with automatic suspicion, if not outright condemnation of the good deeds of selfless good Samaritans whose only mission is to redeem the compromised humanity of the “weak and the powerless”. Empowering the “weak and the powerless” would certainly go a long way in achieving the goal of a cosmopolitan citizenship that “took root in the modern world [...] as part of an effort to remake the world so that it better served the interests of humanity.” (Calhoun 76). Appiah goes back to the fight to abolish slavery and remarks that the massive adhesion of English working classes to this cause could be explained by the fact that slavery expressed the idea of dishonor and alienation associated with manual labour. In a society that had little consideration for working classes, “claiming a dignity for them was a radical
Dignity, “an inner transcendental kernel, a core of value that must be protected above all else” (Rosen, 75), allows for a distinction between humans endowed with a capacity to think and animals bent on satisfying their basic needs. The concept of dignity emerges as a major component in the articulation of political theory in Kant’s ethical thought, which has come to play a vital role in the moralization of political behavior, as witness the emergence of human rights as the moral compass of international relations. Kant defines dignity as that which is priceless: “In the Kingdom of ends everything has either a price or dignity. What has a price can be replaced by something else as its equivalent; what on the other hand is raised above all price and therefore admits of no equivalent has dignity” (quoted by Rosen 20-12).

Dongala’s *Johnny Mad Dog* explores the dark side of humanitarian interventions. The background to this intervention is a chaotic civil war that forces civilian populations trapped between the warring factions to flee. Laokolé, a teenage-girl, has seen her father killed during a rebel invasion at their home. During another chaotic displacement provoked by the assault of the capital city by one of the warring factions, she is in charge of her mother, who has lost her legs, and her younger brother who is eventually lost. Laokolé is the symbol of innocent victims whence her moral fortitude (Kearney 75). Johnny Mad Dog, a “vicious sixteen year old boy soldier” (Coundiriots 195) in charge of a militia unit, symbolizes both the forces of destruction and the lost childhood. Henik Vigh, in his study of young soldiers in Guinea-Bissau, remarks that African conflicts are generally perceived as “messy, untamed and chaotic wars, with main agents of chaos being armed, irregular youth” (Vigh 28). Johnny Mad Dog and his gang of child soldiers fit this pattern as they steal, intimidate, kill and rape at will. The two characters are the dual narrators of the story, each one casting a unique, intimate view on the civil war. The chaos created by the war stands as a powerful symbol of the failure of the postcolonial state. The novel engages in a critique of ready-made theories that are used to explain away the responsibility of Africans in their own misfortune. Dongala challenges the all-encompassing, if sometimes hollow and ineffective
thesis, of western indifference and exploitation as the root cause of the civil war and the ensuing misery and chaos that it creates: “I couldn’t see what the exploitation of diamonds had to do with the cruelty of that militia fighter Mad Dog, who had coldly shot a little kid kneeling in front of him and begging for his life, or how our country’s mineral wealth is related to the brutality of the soldier who had killed Papa and broken Mama’s legs.” (Dongala 145). Laokolé repudiates the discourse of the Belgian journalist who attributes the despair of civilian populations to the indifference of the Western world. Such an indictment reinforces the centrality of the West in African affairs, therefore relegating Africans to a role as passive victims. The humanitarian narrative, in order to be effective as a tool of emotional mobilization, needs the image of the perfect victim. The construction of this victim sometimes requires a focus on the most sensational dimension of the suffering.

Laokolé’s mother, despite her suffering, is passed over by humanitarian agents who are more concerned about dogs, though her pain and suffering are not completely forgotten. “When it bleeds, it leads.’ In other words, the bloodier the image, the more visually compelling it is and the better it works,” says Katelijne, the Belgian journalist, in an attempt to convince Laokolé to allow her to film her mother. Laokolé refuses to have her crippled mother’s body filmed:

At that, I lost my temper. Mama’s stumps were our suffering, our pain. Katelijne saw them only as something that would attract the attention of an audience. Was she completely heartless? No, I don’t think so—she simply lived in another universe. She didn’t understand that poor people like us didn’t make a display of our misery. We had the right to keep it private. (Dongala, 147)

Johnny Mad Dog and his gang of child soldiers participate in what James calls “terror economies” (James, 26). Innocent and terrorized victims are at the center of this situation, because they can help humanitarian agents generate “compassion economies” (James 26). The valuation of the humanitarian portfolio depends on their capacity to convert the suffering of victims such as Laokolé’s mother into tools that can help mobilize financial, political, or strategic resources. “When it bleeds, it leads,” is a mantra that serves
to shock western audiences and transform them into advocates. They can then contribute financial resources or press their government to intervene. In the “growing humanitarian market” (James 33), brokers depend on powerful images to help shake complacent viewers into active volunteers or financial contributors. The media coverage is critical in the marketing of humanitarian disasters. Laokolé challenges the voyeuristic orientation of the representation of suffering. Yet she expects some assistance from western humanitarians. The press coverage, as troubling as it may be, represents an opportunity to call attention to the disaster in Western public opinion. Only such a strategy could eventually help raise the funds that would sustain humanitarian interventions.

The voluntary participation of some of the characters caught in the crossfire arouses Laokolé’s indignation, who considers the wide distribution of graphic images of suffering as an infringement of human dignity. The use of the distress of displaced populations as a marketing tool in raising funds that will eventually contribute to the alleviation of such ordeals may be interpreted as an instance of the “instrumentalization” of the human. This deontological transgression does raise a certain number of questions. One question that comes to mind is whether or not the preservation of the human integrity must stand in the way of the survival of these victims. Such a question does not directly amount to a conflict between human dignity and humanitarian action. On the contrary, humanitarian action sets as its ultimate goal the upholding of human dignity. It is more about the means mobilized to reach such lofty objectives. Kant’s categorical imperative, otherwise known as the Formula for Humanity, calls for a treatment of human beings as ends, not means. The formula of the Universal Law calls for all actions to be placed under the sovereignty of an eventual universal law. However, Kant is well aware that the duty to help others is fatally an imperfect undertaking (Rosen 87). Kantian deontology, in this case, may simply be read as an awareness of these imperfections and a call for constant vigilance. The humanitarian who is fully aware of Kant’s teachings will not necessarily become perfect, but he or she stands a better chance of rising up to the challenge enunciated by Appiah, for dignity is also the pledge to endure “suffering in the struggle to meet the demands of duty”
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(Rosen 36). Dignity, understood in the context of this relation to the other applies to both the giver and the receiver of aid: “To respect someone’s dignity by treating them with dignity requires that one shows them respect, either positively, by acting toward them in a way that gives expression to one’s respect, or, at least, negatively by refraining from behavior that would show disrespect” (Rosen 58). The kantian conception therefore postulates an egalitarian idea of dignity, contrasting with the aristocratic conception of honor as part of a demarcating line between inferiors and superiors. The exceptionality of the human comes from the fact that he is endowed with morality: “Only morality has dignity and human beings carry the moral law within themselves, so it would be wrong to think of human beings as part of the natural world in the way that rivers, trees, or dogs are” (Rosen 24).

Calhoun reminds us that humanitarian operations are “top-down efforts in which money and expertise empowered some to act for-or in-others.” With the increasing (and corrupting) political and financial clout, humanitarianism may be tempted to reproduce the aristocratic understanding of honor, that is, the establishment of a hierarchy in the distribution of human dignity. In Les aubes écarlates, Miano suggests that Africans do not succeed in inscribing their experience into the global human condition because they are incapable of going beyond the negative representations that have so long excluded them from the human race (Miano 138). This exclusion from the human race has sometimes taken the form of unflattering comparisons between Africans and the animal kingdom.

**Darlings from the Animal Kingdom**

There are two instances in Dongala’s novel in which the protection of animals takes precedence over distressed populations caught in a vicious civil war. In the midst of interventions to rescue Westerners caught in the chaotic situation created by the civil war, saving a dog seems to be considered more important than helping afflicted women and children. The first instance when human beings lose out to animals comes during a rescue staged to extract western expatriates trapped in a United Nations compound:
Two soldiers got out of the truck, supporting a woman who was on the verge of hysteria. “My little one! My darling! I have to find him!” In the general confusion, the soldiers had no doubt forgotten to take her child, a baby who was probably sleeping blissfully in an impoverished cradle. The three of them went into the building. They wasted no time, and came out again almost immediately. They were no longer supporting the woman, who was holding a little poodle, its curly coat neatly manicured. Escorted by the two armed soldiers, she walked out the door caressing the animal.

(Dongala 160-161)

Laokolé, who has lost his brother and whose mother has lost both legs, witnesses this scene. If the dog is the “darling”, then distressed populations are certainly pushed to the symbolic status of our neighbors from the animal kingdom. It is therefore significant that during the course of this rescue mission, a truck transporting Western citizens and their pets crushes Mélanie, a young woman displaced by the war. Emergency humanitarian workers are too busy saving the expatriates and their dogs to pay attention to Mélanie. When Laokolé is lost in the equatorial forest, “ecologists working to save endangered species” (Dongala 281) decline to provide her with any help, despite her repeated appeals: “Well by that point I considered myself an endangered species. If they could save animals, they could also save me.” (Dongala 181). The message seems quite unambiguous: saving gorillas takes precedence over assisting a distressed young woman.

Emily Apter writes that during the Bosnian conflict, “small differences in Serbo-Croatian (or what used to be Serbo-Croatian) were used to determine whether you were an animal or a human.” Based on these artificial differences, Serbian was spoken by humans, while the others were considered animals and “could be shot like dogs.” (Apter 53). Laokolé and other refugees are considered less than dogs who are either ignored or trampled over by trucks. Earlier in the novel, one character laments, “The West valued our gorillas and oil more than it did our people” (Dongala 145). The lament refers to a phenomenon that goes back to the early days of colonial encounters between Europeans and Africans. Hortense Spillers has stated that “modern history begins in slavery and colonization, periods during which the African personality is not just the other,
but the place where the human stops.” (Spillers, 53). By pointing out the priority given to animal rights, Dongala may be inviting the reader to consider the intervention of western humanitarian and environmental agents as another theater where African humanity stops. The story of Ota Benga illustrates Spillers’s point. Ota Benga, who finds himself on exhibition in the monkey cage at the Bronx Zoological Park, “represents the missing link between the higher man and the chimpanzee” (Chicago Tribune G22). Deprived of human dignity, he cannot count on the protection afforded by primatism, “the plea for the forsaken rights of animals” (Apter, 53).

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